

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 580

CS 510 244

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TITLE The Externship: From the Classroom to the Newsroom.
PUB DATE 1999-11-10
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (85th, Chicago, Illinois, November 4-7, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Broadcast Journalism; *Experiential Learning; Higher Education; *Internship Programs; Journalism Education; Mass Media; *Student Participation; Television Curriculum

ABSTRACT

Defining the externship as an internship hybrid, an away-from-campus one-day experience which faculty build into the required assignments of many upper-division courses, this paper discusses a particular externship at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville which is a regular part of a 300-level broadcast news course. All of the students in the course spend a day following a TV news reporter around the newsroom, attending story meetings, going out on location covering stories, and working in the editing room and on whatever else the reporter happens to encounter during the shift. After the externship the students provide the instructor with a short paper describing their experiences and also, in an open discussion session, students share their observations with the entire class. The paper advocates that no less than one junior year externship experience should be built into each professional sequence in a communications program. (NKA)

The Externship: From the Classroom to the Newsroom

A paper presented to the annual meeting
of the National Communication Association, Fall, 1999

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Internships are the kind of learning encounters that most of us immediately think of when someone brings up the topic of experiential learning in the business world. However, another kind of encounter – one that may precede an internship by as long as two years – is gaining wider acceptance in communications programs today.

The externship is an internship hybrid, an away-from-campus experience which faculty build into the required assignments of many upper-division courses. Unlike the internship, an externship is just a one-day activity: the student spends an eight-hour shift “shadowing” a media practitioner at his/her job. Now some internships are very “hands-on.” But on an externship, usually a student doesn’t actively participate: he or she instead “shadows” a professional for a day, asks questions, receives advice and learns about the job by observation.

For example, as a regular part of my 300-level broadcast news course at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, all of my students spend a day following a TV news reporter around the newsroom, attending story meetings, going out on location covering stories, working in the editing room, and whatever else the reporter happens to encounter during the shift.

Since externships are one-day experiences, the logistical difficulties of setting up,

administering and commuting to semester-long internships are comparatively few. And for those of you whose campus is in a more isolated place, frequent transportation from the campus to an internship venue in some regional city might cause a financial or logistical problem. The externship is a much less difficult arrangement.

Now let's be clear: I'm not advocating an externship as a replacement for an internship, but rather as a pre-internship experience. Finding ways to solve the logistical and financial problems of the internship is simply another challenge.

The individual experience on an externship doesn't have to be the only learning opportunity for your students. Since some days on the job are more exciting and valuable than others, there's value in sharing different student experiences after the fact. Also, student feedback on their externship experiences will help the professor to improve that experience in subsequent semesters.

So after the externship, my students provide me with a short paper describing their experiences. This may include what they learned, what they didn't learn and wished they did, what it was like to shadow a certain reporter, interesting experiences, and any of their personal or professional decisions that the externship might help clarify.

Also, I have my students share their observations with the entire class in an open discussion session. Feedback from eight years of student externship experiences in my broadcast news course tells me that their adventures in a TV station's news department are among the highlights of their semester -- and in some instances, of their academic career to date. Students routinely recommend that more skills courses in our major incorporate some form of externship experience.

A "Pre-internship"

One of the most important by-products of the externship experience is in clarifying the nature of the professional experience for the student before devoting an entire semester to an internship that may -- or may not -- be a pleasant and rewarding

experience.

Many programs use internships as a finishing experience. They find that the pros appreciate an intern who can do more than answer the phone, lick envelopes and get coffee – someone who can perhaps make a real contribution to the organization – someone who might be skilled enough to hire after they finish the internship and graduate.

Because of this, many programs save the internship for the senior year. My program is one. We combine a senior portfolio requirement with the internship, so we strongly recommend that our students complete their internships during the last semester of their senior year. But one of the problems in programs that use the internship as a finishing experience is that a student may get all the way through an academic program only to discover that the reality of a day on the job is not at all what he or she thought it would be. It's not as glamorous -- or as enjoyable as he/she imagined. This student is stuck in a less-than-productive internship for a semester. This senior is also stuck in a professional sequence – nearly completed – that he or she has just learned they don't like.

For example, one of my broadcast news students returned from her externship in a terrible mood. During our in-class discussion of their externship experiences, she explained that she had always assumed that a TV news reporter led a fairly glamorous life. So on externship day, she wore her nicest business suit, hose and heels. The reporter she shadowed on that fateful day was assigned a story requiring the video crew to slog their way through a wet field with mud up to their ankles. My poor student lost both of her expensive shoes somewhere in that mud. Later, informed by the reality of a day in the life of a reporter, my student changed her major sequence, graduated and was hired at that same station in their public relations and promotions department.

After an externship, other students become excited and re-dedicated to their

studies. A few others, faced with professional realities that are significantly different from their dreams, actually change majors. But if these students find out what's right for them at a time early enough in their college careers to do something about it, they'll ultimately be very thankful to you and to the department -- and so will their parents.

Other kinds of personal revelations result from the externship experience, lending clarity to the realities that faculty often preach in the classroom -- those same realities that often go unheeded or un-believed. But hearing a pro say the same things their professor does can give students a new respect for what they hear in the classroom.

Many broadcasting and mass communications curricula consist of a core of general freshman and sophomore courses followed by more specific courses at the upper division. During the junior year is when many of our students select a more defined sequence of courses and begin to focus their career interests into a more specific set of skills -- such as television production, broadcast news, advertising, public relations and so forth. This is the ideal time in a student's college career for an externship. Also, this may be the first opportunity for the rural college or university student to develop relationships with professionals in the field. This kind of networking can lead later on to internship offers, part-time job opportunities, and even offers of post-graduate employment.

I think that no less than one junior year externship experience should be built into each professional sequence in a communications program. Externships add immensely to the credibility of an instructor and the entire program. Using the externship as an additional experiential learning tool in a curriculum is an exciting addition to course activities -- and has comparatively fewer logistical problems than the internship. And externships add considerable "color and texture" to a course. And they can help students by assuring them that they're "on the right track".

Finally, I guarantee you that that your students will remember what they learned

on that externship long after they've forgotten the notes they took on your favorite lecture.

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